

How Mexican cities can meet women's transport needs after COVID-19



The majority of women in Mexican cities depend on public transport to get to work. Yet sprawling urban development and a lack of safe, well-connected transport infrastructure means that they are denied mobility and the opportunities that come with it. Mexico's government must look at transport through a gender lens as the country emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, write [Catarina Heeckt](#) (LSE Cities) and [Ana María Martínez](#) (WRI Cities).

Mexico's urban sprawl, car dependency, and wildly unequal access to opportunities have deepened the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised communities. The pandemic has also underlined the need to focus not just on mobility – how efficiently people can move around a city – but also on urban accessibility – whether they can readily access jobs, services, goods, and other key resources.



"Where housing development outpaces the arrival of formal public services, there are serious implications for women in particular" ([Mariel Rodríguez](#), [Unsplash licence](#))

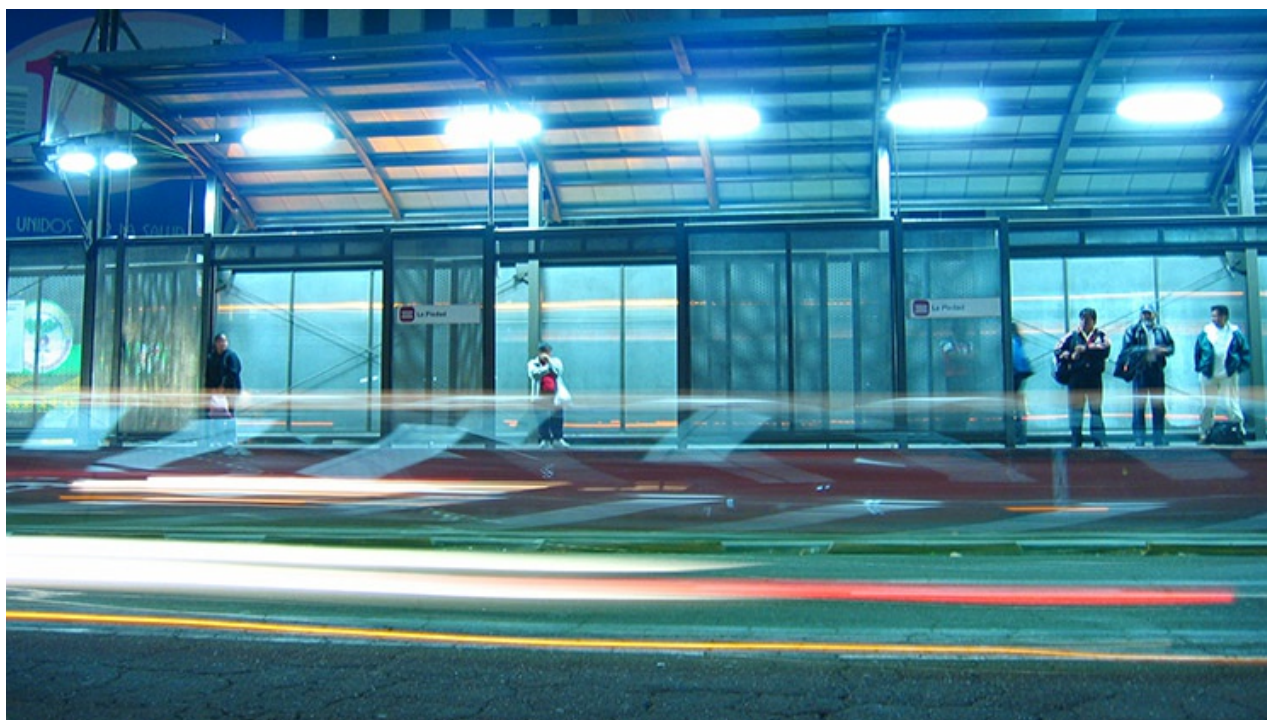
This is a particular challenge in the rapidly growing peripheries of Mexican cities, where dispersed and disconnected housing development is outpacing the delivery of formal public services. This has serious implications for women in particular, who are much more likely to rely on public transport than men. Not giving women equal access to urban opportunities through well connected and safe public and active transport infrastructure has serious economic and social consequences. It will also make it harder for Mexico to recover from the pandemic.

In Mexico City, 90% of women report having experienced some form of violence on their daily commute.

We know that [gender shapes mobility behaviour](#), affecting everything from mode choice and travel times to preferred routes and even clothing. Women on the whole tend to have more [complex and varied travel patterns than men](#), often travelling at off-peak times and engaging in many smaller trips, an activity known as "[trip-chaining](#)". Yet the gendered dimension of urban accessibility continues to be largely ignored in policy-making, and especially in transport planning.

Gender, COVID-19, and public transport in Mexico

While a minority of wealthier women have been able to commute in private vehicles or shift to working from home, the majority of Mexican women continue to depend heavily on public transport during the COVID-19 crisis. In Mexico City, where [74% of all trips are completed on collective transport](#), [90% of women report](#) having experienced some form of violence on their daily commute. The pandemic has made these arduous and unsafe journeys worse, forcing women to navigate difficult trade-offs between paid and unpaid work or between their own safety and their responsibilities as carers for children and the elderly. The situation is only aggravated by limited and sub-optimal mobility options, which often come with unpredictable and lengthy commute times.



“Not giving women equal access to urban opportunities through transport infrastructure has serious economic and social consequences” (“[Metrobus](#)“, [Beto Sanchez](#), CC BY-NC 2.0 licence, cropped and rotated slightly)

Deeply ingrained cultural norms and gender roles in Mexico have played a part in exacerbating the effects of the pandemic. There has been a worrying [increase in domestic violence and femicide](#) in Mexico, adding to an already troubling situation when it comes to violence against women. Despite a [low female labour-force participation rate](#) of only 41.7% (compared to 73.5% for men), many essential jobs [are done by women](#), including more than 70% of paid care work. Aside from the fact that women already shoulder [more than 75%](#) of unpaid care and housework, this overrepresentation in paid care work increases women's exposure to the virus. They are also more likely to take precarious jobs in the informal economy, which have [become more common for women during the pandemic](#).

Using transport to provide opportunities for women

Even though the pandemic has clearly had a negative impact on female mobility in Mexico, this does not have to be a permanent legacy of the current health crisis. There is a real opportunity to transform Mexico's urban land use and transport systems to give women more access to a wide range of urban opportunities beyond the private sphere of the home. Designing urban mobility systems with the needs of women (or children, the disabled, and the elderly) in mind leads to higher quality, safer, and more efficient transport for all urban residents. Mobility for all is an essential precondition for reactivating the economy and ensuring that Mexico can recover quickly from the huge economic and social shock of the crisis.

An increasing number of cities are confronting the challenges head on. Under the leadership of Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico City introduced its [Gender and Mobility Plan 2019-2024](#), which addresses women's different mobility needs and tackles issues such as [harassment and unequal participation](#). This mirrors efforts in other Latin American cities such as [Bogotá](#) and [Medellín](#).



"Mobility for all is an essential precondition for reactivating the economy and ensuring that Mexico can recover quickly from the huge economic and social shock of the crisis" (Mexico City, Marcelo Rodríguez/Shutterstock.com)

Despite these important city-level efforts and the fierce advocacy of feminist activists and civil society groups, national government action still lacks a thorough gender lens to understand Mexico's deeper problems. The current administration, which [came to power in 2018 promising to fight for the most vulnerable Mexicans](#), has embarked on an unprecedented [austerity drive](#). This has been used to justify cuts to a number of programmes that directly or indirectly benefited women, including a 75% reduction in the budget of various federal entities (including the National Institute of Women), a near total [stop on any national support for urban mobility projects](#) through the elimination of the Metropolitan Fund, and concern for the [future of the National Infrastructure Fund \(FONADIN\)](#).

Without clear leadership at the national level, many smaller cities with fewer resources and less capacity to tackle this challenge risk being left behind. This is why a national urban mobility and land use strategy that explicitly incorporates a gender perspective is so essential.

A handful of fairly obvious win-win solutions would begin to address the issue of gender equality in transport.

The recovery from COVID will mean more public spending than has been seen for generations. This will not only shape the future of urban development in Mexico, it will also determine whether or not women benefit. A handful of fairly obvious win-win solutions would begin to address the issue of gender equality in transport and build resilience in Mexican cities.

Mainstreaming gender equality in urban policy-making

Gender mainstreaming means integrating a gender-equality perspective into all stages and levels of policies, programmes, and projects. This would require the adoption of a national urban policy (which Mexico does not have) that explicitly recognises the importance of eliminating gender biases in urban planning. That policy should set out clearly defined roles, create a mechanism to coordinate planning and collaboration across sectors and levels of government, and provide an overarching vision to ensure policy coherence and incentives for more sustainable and equitable urban practices.

Inclusion in decision-making and gender-disaggregated data

The Mexican government should invest in programmes to ensure there are more women in leadership positions across all levels of government. Since policy is only ever as good as the data that informs it, expanding gender-disaggregated data collection and project evaluation will also play an important role in ensuring that women's needs are at the centre of future transport and accessibility initiatives.

Gender-responsive budgeting for public and active travel

Gender-responsive budgets can help to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, and transparency of government policy. At present, less than 10% of federal transport funding nationwide is spent on public transport, even though public transport accounts for over 50% of all trips. This does not necessarily require an increase in the overall transport budget, but rather a re-prioritisation towards investments that reflect the mobility needs of women by focusing on public and active travel. Funding new infrastructure is essential, but it will need to be accompanied by ongoing investments in operations and maintenance to ensure that using public and active modes of transport is safe, pleasant, and efficient for women.

Notes:

- *The views expressed here are of the authors rather than the Centre or the LSE*
- *This post builds on [new research by LSE Cities, OECD and WRI Mexico](#) for the [Coalition for Urban Transitions](#) that identifies what the Mexican government can do to support more compact, connected, clean, and inclusive cities, as well as how these reforms could fundamentally transform the urban experience in the post-COVID era.*
- *This article is a slightly edited version of a post that first appeared on the [LSE COVID-19 blog](#)*
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